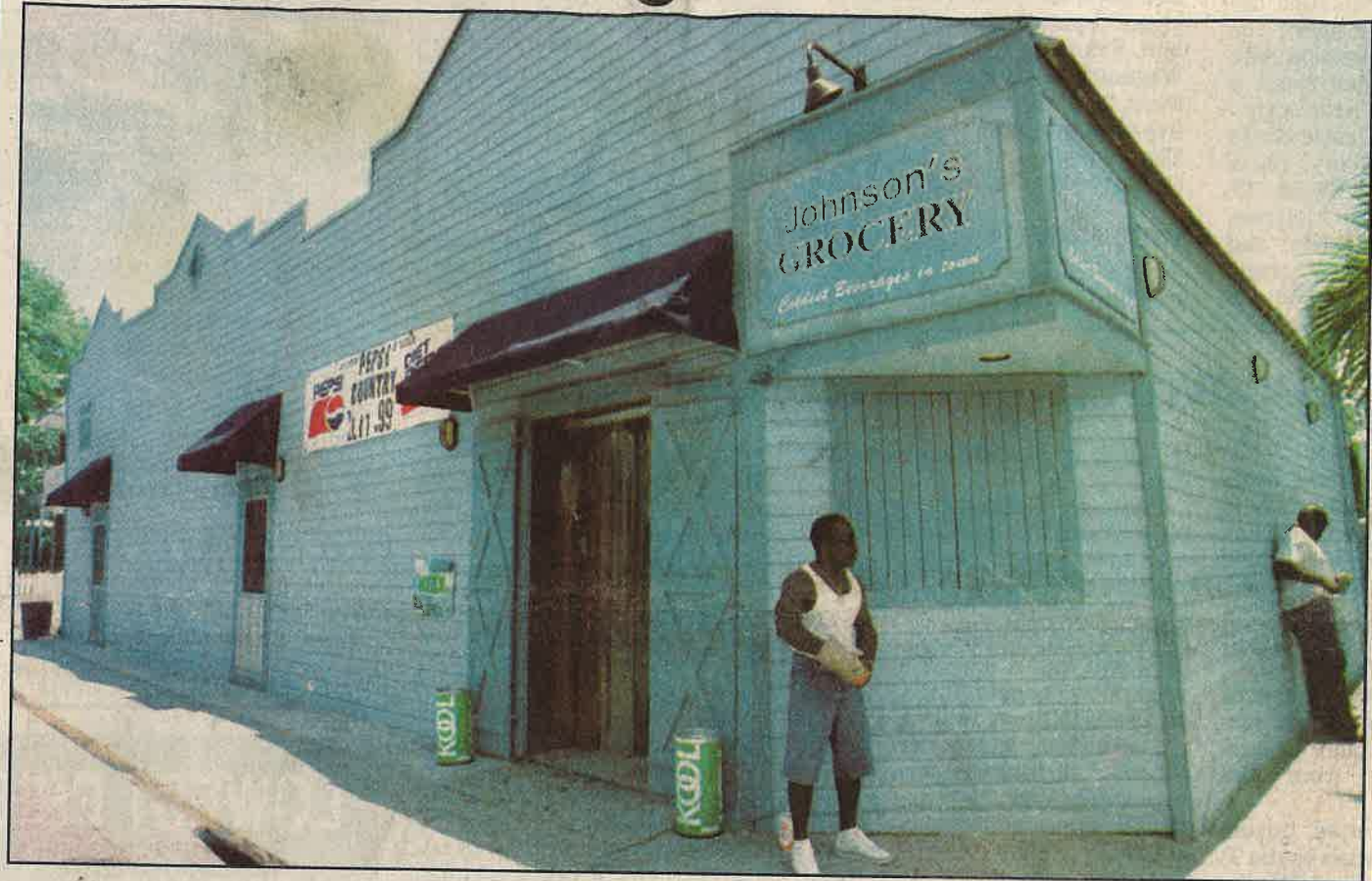


A village reborn



MIKE HENTZ / The Citizen

Johnson's Grocery is a steadfast institution in a neighborhood that is quickly rebounding in Key West.

Bahama Village deals with growing pains

By MARC CAPUTO
Citizen Staff Writer

KEY WEST — Children's laughter still rings down Bahama Village's shady lanes, and the locals still clatter dominoes at dusk outside their ancestral homes. But now there's a new and growing sound: the swinging of hammers, the buzz of saws.

And there's also an old and growing problem that the construction helping to perpetuate.

Climbing property values and taxes are causing the descendants of the village's early Bahamian settlers to leave in droves from this borough — the first free black community in



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The American Legion/VFW Hall on Emma Street in Bahama Village.

the cemetery at

— Monroe's deputies arrested 17 teenagers on connection with theft from a food restaurant. Arrested Jessie Scott, 18, of Henry, 18, of Ward Sweat, 19, Josh McGrew, Grand Key and and charged with burglary. The ar-

caine on the road.

Officer Ken Fricke said the bag sat unnoticed on "De Man's Curve" on So. Roosevelt for two days before jogger spotted it and called him. Fricke and officer Don Wagon opened the bag. Inside were 26 individually wrapped five-by-eight inch packages. The 2.2 pounds of powder failed tested positive for cocaine.

Drug arrest

KEY WEST — A bicycle search resulted in a drug arrest

es recovered in hel

LE (AP) — A reported overboarded USS Kennedy is the Navy has victims killed Jacksonville-based ship during a off the coast of March. y of a six-month the Mediterranean sailor was reard from the

ts tried unsuccessful airman Nadia T. Angeles, by ings. She was after a 28-hour

happened April was conducting about 130 miles onville, but the exactly how the verboard. investigation," y of the Atlan-

tic Fleet in Norfolk said Tuesday.

The search included three helicopters and three ships and covered 3,600 miles of ocean.

Meanwhile, the Navy reported that the bodies of three soldiers killed March 13 have been recovered and that a search and salvage effort is continuing 150 miles off Cape Hatteras, N.C.

The bodies, which have been returned to their families, were recovered April 27 using a remotely operated vehicle equipped with a video camera and mechanical arms.

Killed in the crash were Cmdr. Joseph F. King, 35, Orange Park; Lt. Christopher

VILLAGE

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the country.

This exodus hasn't gone unnoticed by some community activists who think they can solve this problem by forming a community land trust to help check higher taxes, fixed incomes and decaying buildings.

"We can't lose any more families here," said Norma Jean Sawyer of the Bahama Conch Community Land Trust. "They're our history, the fabric that developed Key West."

The nonprofit land trust wants to fix up scores of decaying homes that have architecture typical of the village — and, also typical of the village, that have several heirs and no occupants.

The trust will track down the heirs and bring them together at the negotiating table as well as help fund renovations, buy the land under the house (bearing the burden of the property taxes) or buy the house outright.

The land trust also wants to get a piece of Navy property on Truman Annex called the Seminole Battery. Most of the Navy property on the annex was taken during different war years and is now in the process of being sold back to the city.

The battery could be used for a park while other buildings on the annex and elsewhere could be converted into centers where carpentry, restaurant and business skills would be taught.

Other projects include fixing up community centers. On Saturday, volunteers plan to fix up the old Veterans of Foreign Wars building, which Sawyer, 46, remembers going to as a little girl. Sawyer, who works out of the Evergreen mortuary on Julia Street, says volunteers and supplies are welcome.

Since its shotgun shacks sprang up in the early 1830s, Bahama Village became a hidden amalgam of Bahamians, freedmen, Keys Indians, whites and Caribbean refugees.

People from the village built Key West after its founding in 1822, supplying the city with spongers, wreckers, fishermen and dock hands for the tall ships that could sail into Key West's natural deep port. Key West was one of the few cities in the nation that had a village of free black

people, although slavery existed on the island.

Bahama Village remained ignored during Key West's tourist boom in the 1980s and it declined gracefully, trees and vines enveloping the rusted roofs of abandoned clapboard shacks.

Now that the shoreline of Key West and most of the island east of Duval Street has been developed thoroughly, business is booming in the village. Black-owned places like the Johnson's Cafe and Johnson's Grocery Store on the corner of Thomas and Petronia A Streets cater to all walks and introduce many to the hidden legacy of Bahama Village's people.

And buildings like the VFW and the Frederick Douglass Gym across the street reflect the growing spirit of renewed community pride in Bahama Village.

If the land trust succeeds, it will join other community-minded programs, that are making Bahama Village the envy of most communities in the United States.

At Douglass Gym, people like lifelong resident Charles Major oversee a daily batch of 35 children ranging in ages from four to 18 years old. The gym offers tutoring, recreation and a helping hand from adults.

Majors says that the cost of living, taxes and welfare reform are being felt all over the island, not just in the village. And so "it's getting to a point where we're all going to have to realize we're neighbors; and neighbors are going to have to start helping neighbors."

Bahama Village is a Key West treasure because it is trying to preserve its sense of community, both Major and Sawyer say. It's where Key West's past dovetails with the nations future.

"If we lose the community here, we're not only losing Bahama Village, we're losing Key West," says Major.

"This isn't New York. It isn't fast-paced," he says. "I like seeing kids playing in the street, people riding bicycles, the sense that we say hello to each other no matter what color you are."

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